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Why Iraq Was a Mistake

By Lieut. General Greg Newbold (Ret.)

Two senior military officers are known to have challenged Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on the planning of the Iraq war. Army General Eric Shinseki publicly dissented and found himself marginalized. Marine Lieut. General Greg Newbold, the Pentagon's top operations officer, voiced his objections internally and then retired, in part out of opposition to the war. Here, for the first time, Newbold goes public with a full-throated critique:

In 1971, the rock group The Who released the antiwar anthem *Won't Get Fooled Again*. To most in my generation the song conveyed a sense of betrayal by the nation's leaders, who had led our country into a costly and unnecessary war in Vietnam. To those of us who were truly counterculture--who became career members of the military during those rough times--the song conveyed a very different message. To us, its lyrics evoked a feeling that we must never again stand by quietly while those ignorant of and casual about war lead us into another one and then mismanage the conduct of it. Never again, we thought, would our military's senior leaders remain silent as American troops were marched off to an ill-considered engagement. It's 35 years later, and the judgment is in: the Who had it wrong. We have been fooled again.

From 2000 until October 2002, I was a Marine Corps lieutenant general and director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. After 9/11, I was a witness and therefore a party to the actions that led us to the invasion of Iraq--an unnecessary war. Inside the military family, I made no secret of my view that the zealots' rationale for war made no sense. And I think I was outspoken enough to make those senior to me uncomfortable. But I now regret that I did not more openly challenge those who were determined to invade a country whose actions were peripheral to the real threat--al-Qaeda. I retired from the military four months before the invasion, in part because of my opposition to those who had used 9/11's tragedy to hijack our security policy. Until now, I have resisted speaking out in public. I've been silent long enough.

I am driven to action now by the missteps and misjudgments of the White House and the Pentagon, and by my many painful visits to our military hospitals. In those places, I have been both inspired and shaken by the broken bodies but unbroken spirits of soldiers, Marines and corpsmen returning from this war. The cost of flawed leadership continues to be paid in blood. The willingness of our forces to shoulder such a load should make it a sacred obligation for civilian and military leaders to get our defense policy right. They must be absolutely sure that the commitment is for a cause as honorable as the sacrifice.

With the encouragement of some still in positions of military leadership, I offer a challenge to those still in uniform: a leader's responsibility is to give voice to those who can't--or don't have the opportunity to--speak. Enlisted members of the armed forces swear their oath to those appointed over them; an officer swears an oath

not to a person but to the Constitution. The distinction is important.

Before the antiwar banners start to unfurl, however, let me make clear--I am not opposed to war. I would gladly have traded my general's stars for a captain's bars to lead our troops into Afghanistan to destroy the Taliban and al-Qaeda. And while I don't accept the stated rationale for invading Iraq, my view--at the moment--is that a precipitous withdrawal would be a mistake. It would send a signal, heard around the world, that would reinforce the jihadists' message that America can be defeated, and thus increase the chances of future conflicts. If, however, the Iraqis prove unable to govern, and there is open civil war, then I am prepared to change my position.

I will admit my own prejudice: my deep affection and respect are for those who volunteer to serve our nation and therefore shoulder, in those thin ranks, the nation's most sacred obligation of citizenship. To those of you who don't know, our country has never been served by a more competent and professional military. For that reason, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's recent statement that "we" made the "right strategic decisions" but made thousands of "tactical errors" is an outrage. It reflects an effort to obscure gross errors in strategy by shifting the blame for failure to those who have been resolute in fighting. The truth is, our forces are successful in spite of the strategic guidance they receive, not because of it.

What we are living with now is the consequences of successive policy failures. Some of the missteps include: the distortion of intelligence in the buildup to the war, McNamara-like micromanagement that kept our forces from having enough resources to do the job, the failure to retain and reconstitute the Iraqi military in time to help quell civil disorder, the initial denial that an insurgency was the heart of the opposition to occupation, alienation of allies who could have helped in a more robust way to rebuild Iraq, and the continuing failure of the other agencies of our government to commit assets to the same degree as the Defense Department. My sincere view is that the commitment of our forces to this fight was done with a casualness and swagger that are the special province of those who have never had to execute these missions--or bury the results.

Flaws in our civilians are one thing; the failure of the Pentagon's military leaders is quite another. Those are men who know the hard consequences of war but, with few exceptions, acted timidly when their voices urgently needed to be heard. When they knew the plan was flawed, saw intelligence distorted to justify a rationale for war, or witnessed arrogant micromanagement that at times crippled the military's effectiveness, many leaders who wore the uniform chose inaction. A few of the most senior officers actually supported the logic for war. Others were simply intimidated, while still others must have believed that the principle of obedience does not allow for respectful dissent. The consequence of the military's quiescence was that a fundamentally flawed plan was executed for an invented war, while pursuing the real enemy, al-Qaeda, became a secondary effort.

There have been exceptions, albeit uncommon, to the rule of silence among military leaders. Former Army Chief of Staff General Shinseki, when challenged to offer his professional opinion during prewar congressional testimony, suggested that more troops might be needed for the invasion's aftermath. The Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense castigated him in public and marginalized him in his remaining months in his post. Army General John Abizaid, head of Central Command, has been forceful in his views with appointed officials on

strategy and micromanagement of the fight in Iraq--often with success. Marine Commandant General Mike Hagee steadfastly challenged plans to underfund, understaff and underequip his service as the Corps has struggled to sustain its fighting capability.

To be sure, the Bush Administration and senior military officials are not alone in their culpability. Members of Congress--from both parties--defaulted in fulfilling their constitutional responsibility for oversight. Many in the media saw the warning signs and heard cautionary tales before the invasion from wise observers like former Central Command chiefs Joe Hoar and Tony Zinni but gave insufficient weight to their views. These are the same news organizations that now downplay both the heroic and the constructive in Iraq.

So what is to be done? We need fresh ideas and fresh faces. That means, as a first step, replacing Rumsfeld and many others unwilling to fundamentally change their approach. The troops in the Middle East have performed their duty. Now we need people in Washington who can construct a unified strategy worthy of them. It is time to send a signal to our nation, our forces and the world that we are uncompromising on our security but are prepared to rethink how we achieve it. It is time for senior military leaders to discard caution in expressing their views and ensure that the President hears them clearly. And that we won't be fooled again.

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